

Report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date of meeting: 16 September 2014



Portfolio Holder: Leader (Local Returning Officer's/
Returning Officer's Report)

Subject: Local Elections – 22 May 2014

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Recommendation:

To consider this review of the elections held on 22 May 2014

Introduction

1. The following elections were held on 22 May 2014:
 - (a) election of seven members of the European Parliament for the Eastern Region of the UK;
 - (b) 19 District Council wards (returning one councillor for each);
 - (c) one Parish Council by-election for the Parish of Buckhurst Hill West (returning one councillor).

Responsibility

2. Responsibility for the three elections was as follows:
 - (a) European Parliamentary Election – I Willett as Local Returning Officer on behalf of Mr S Packham, Regional Returning Officer (Chelmsford City Council);
 - (b) District Council Elections – I Willett as Returning Officer;
 - (c) Parish Council By-Election – I Willett as Returning Officer.

Statistics

3. Voter turnout at the various elections ranged between 44% in respect of those entitled to vote in the Buckhurst Hill East ward and 28% in respect of the Waltham Abbey Paternoster ward. The turnout for the European Parliamentary Election in the District was 35.58 % compared with a turnout of 35.90% across the whole region.
4. The total number of postal votes issued for the elections was 8309. Only eight packs failed to reach the electors in the post and had to be re-issued. 73% were returned which equates well with previous elections. 24 postal votes were handed in at polling stations. In the Council's post on the days immediately following polling day a total of 20 postal vote packages were received. A few were returned as undelivered because electors had moved or died and the Elections Office had not been notified.

Nomination Process

5. The statutory timescale provided for the receipt of nominations for candidates by not later than 4pm on 24 April 2014. One nomination paper delivered on 24 April, when informally checked by the Elections Office did not have the necessary consent to include a political party logo on the ballot paper and the agent had insufficient time to rectify this error before the submission deadline.
6. It should be noted that the nomination process in respect of the European Parliamentary election was solely the responsibility of the Regional Returning Officer.

Arrangements

7. A Project Plan and a Risk Register for the combined elections were prepared in December 2013 and updated on a regular basis. An Engagement Strategy was prepared for the European Parliamentary election. Meetings were held with the Regional Returning Officer who issued a number of directions to Local Returning Officers regarding the conduct of the European Parliamentary election and count.

Polling Stations

8. 80 established Polling Stations were provided in 64 different buildings. This required the appointment of 72 presiding officers and around 125 poll clerks. Sufficient staff were appointed including standby staff some of whom had to be called upon at short notice.
9. All of the polling stations were opened on time without incident. No issues were raised regarding the layout or access to polling stations. In one building in which two polling stations were situated some electors went to the wrong one as the street lists directing electors could not be seen if a number of electors were queuing for their ballot papers. This was particularly noticeable at Murray Hall, Loughton. Whilst the staff were able to redirect the electors this did lead to some delay and congestion which if repeated next year at the Parliamentary election when the turnout is expected to be higher could present problems. Consideration will be given to improving the ways in which electors can be directed when initially entering such buildings.

Postal Votes

10. The issue of postal votes went reasonably smoothly. At the initial opening session the software and scanners used for checking personal identifiers (signature and date of birth) did not work well and it was necessary to get Xpress (the software providers) to change settings remotely. Once this had been done the sessions went smoothly. There was no evidence of any postal vote fraud although 196 postal votes were rejected for various reasons. Over 60 of these because the pack did not contain a ballot paper or a postal voting statement. Others were rejected because of mismatched signature or date of birth or both. In relation to those rejected due to mismatched signature or date of birth, regulations made under the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 now require the Electoral Registration Officer to inform electors, after a poll, that their postal vote identifiers have been rejected (unless fraud is suspected). This should help electors who submit their postal ballot packs in good faith to avoid their vote being rejected at future elections.

Ballot Papers

11. The proofs of all District Council and Parish Council by-election ballot papers were scrutinised carefully and all ballot papers were printed in the correct format. Due to a misunderstanding, the logo for the LRA Group (the letters LRA) was not reproduced as agreed following the elections in 2013. A proof has now been agreed with the LRA agent before the next election to ensure that the logo is reproduced in the agreed font. In addition a manual check was made of each printed ballot paper prior to election day to ensure that books were printed correctly and that all papers included the official mark. All of the papers were printed by the Council's Reprographics Section which again provided an excellent service bearing in mind the tight timescale for printing.
12. There were no reports from polling stations of printing errors on the papers which suggests that the checks made before polling day were accurate.
13. Due to the size and number of ballot papers required for the European Parliamentary election it was necessary to engage an external printer. This printer produced papers for several of the Essex authorities and no errors were found.

Spoilt Papers

14. The number of ballot papers rejected in respect of the District Council Elections varied between 47 in the Grange Hill ward and one in the Waltham Abbey Paternoster ward. The majority of papers were rejected for being unmarked or wholly void for uncertainty. 185 European Parliamentary election ballot papers were rejected, 181 of which being unmarked or void for uncertainty or voting for more than one candidate.

Verification and Counts

15. Verification and counting of ballot papers took place at Theydon Bois Village Hall on 23 May and 25 May. Although it took some time to verify due to the need to sort and count District Council and the large European Parliamentary election papers the process went smoothly. The District Council elections and the Parish Council by-election counts were completed very quickly.
16. The timing of the European Parliamentary election count on 25 May was dictated by the need to ensure that the results would not be announced until after voting had closed throughout the 28 member states of the European Union. In this District the count commenced at 5.30pm and was completed by 8.30pm. However, staff were required to remain at the count centre until 10pm until authorised to leave by the Regional Returning Officer.
17. In view of the limited car parking available at the Theydon Bois Village Hall arrangements were made with the North Essex Parking Partnership to relax the enforcement of parking restrictions on single yellow lines in the vicinity of the Hall on 23 May for staff, candidates, agents etc. attending the verification/count. All of those expected to attend were reminded of the need to display the notice provided on the dashboard of their vehicle.

Police Liaison

18. Discussions were held with the Police prior the election. Polling Stations received visits during the day. There were no instances requiring immediate Police presence outside of the regular visits. There was also Police support provided at the Count Centre. From a policing prospective the elections gave little cause for concern

although one incident at a polling station which could have justified police presence was ultimately dealt with by polling station staff. Police visits during polling day were well received by Polling Station staff.

Complaints and Queries Received in the Elections Office

19. There were few telephone calls made to the Elections Office on 22 May by electors.

Review of Procedures

20. An evaluation has been undertaken of the processes outlined in the Project Plan and Risk Register.
21. A Project Team comprising the Local Returning Officer/Returning Officer, Deputy Returning Officers, Public Relations and Marketing Officer and the Returning Officer designate met regularly between November 2013 and May 2014 to ensure that the processes were undertaken at the appropriate times.
22. Sufficient resources were allocated to the elections.
23. The levels of staffing for polling stations, verification and counts were adequate. Assumptions made about the level of staff required for the issue and opening of postal votes proved correct as these proceedings were all completed in good time. Directors were helpful in making officers available for all of the processes.
24. Poll cards and ballot papers for the District Council elections and Parish Council by-election were printed internally by the Reprographics Section within the specified timescales. Being in-house it was easy for officers to liaise with the printers and achieve speedy turnaround times for approving drafts etc.
25. Training was provided for presiding officers, poll clerks and senior count staff.
26. Using established polling stations ensured that buildings were suitable.
27. Theydon Bois Village Hall again proved to be a good venue for the verification and counts although consideration will need to be given to an alternative larger venue next year capable of accommodating the Parliamentary Election count.
28. An adequate level of police support was provided. A meeting was held with the Single Point of Contact (SPOC) officer and agreement reached on the level of support.
29. Once the District Council ballot papers had been printed a system was put in place to ensure that they were securely stored and free from interference at all times. Staff checking books of ballot papers ensured that the papers were not left unsupervised at any time.
30. The Council's Public Relations and Marketing Officer supported by the Website Officer ensured that appropriate publicity was made available at all stages with links to the Council's website. Social media was also used to spread the message.
31. Stationery and equipment levels were checked at an early stage and adequate supplies obtained.
32. Nomination forms were informally checked when received and with one exception this enabled agents to correct errors before the close of nominations. Agents were

provided with detailed guidance about the various processes.

33. All of the statutory timescales were met.
34. Throughout the election period the Elections Office was staffed for the handling of queries from electors, agents and candidates.

Lessons Learned

35. Broadly speaking there were no key issues arising at the May 2014 elections. Generally all practices were completed successfully.
36. Further discussions will be held with the software providers to ensure that the settings are set correctly to read signatures and dates of birth on postal vote statements.

Future Elections

37. In May 2015 there will be the Parliamentary election, elections for a third of the District Council seats and parish council elections in approximately half of the parish/town councils. The Parliamentary election count has to be undertaken on the same night as voting closes (ie Thursday). This will necessitate finding an alternative counting centre for that evening as the Theydon Bois Village Hall is not considered large enough for verification of the ballot papers and the Parliamentary election count. Contact will be made with secondary schools which have a large hall. However, a school hall will not be available on the following day for the District Council count and this will probably be held at Theydon Bois Village Hall. Consideration will also need to be given to the timing of parish/town council counts as there may not be sufficient time to complete them on the day following the election.
38. The Faversham Hall will no longer be available for use as a polling station and the Returning Officer will shortly commence a search for a suitable alternative building at Chigwell Row.
39. The Returning Officer will also give consideration to ways of improving how electors can be directed when initially entering buildings housing more than one polling station.
40. A reminder will be given next year to political parties and agents of the importance of proper supervision of poll cards collected from electors at polling stations. At one station a batch of poll cards was left unattended. It will also be stressed again that, in accordance with the protocol agreed with local political parties, tellers should only ask electors for their details or their poll card on the way out of polling stations. There were instances again this year of electors being asked for their details on their way into the polling station.

Members' Views

41. Members at the Constitution and Member Services Scrutiny Panel on 28 July, expressed concern about the potential difficulties regarding the forthcoming May 2015 General, District and Parish elections where verification will take place at the same time. Although it had been acknowledged that more counters will be needed, Members continued to support using Theydon Bois Village Hall as the counting venue. The Panel suggested that more space can be utilised at the hall by using the stage and moving press representatives to another area and proposed providing refreshments for visitors/guests. The Returning Officer agreed to factor these issues into a review on the adequacy of this venue for future elections.

The Returning Officer also agreed to review the implications of using different staff rotas for the polling day and the count. The Panel requested a protocol with all parties to advise on the correct procedure for the disposal of poll cards collected by tellers at polling stations.